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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PHNOM PENH 000318

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SUBJECT: A VIOLENT WEEKEND IN CAMBODIA: POPULAR SINGER
SHOT; UNION LEADER KILLED

11. (SBU) Summary. On February 23, popular singer Pov Panhapich was shot by an unidentified gunman and later evacuated to Vietnam for medical treatment. She is in stable condition, and media reports speculate that she was linked romantically to a high-level RGC official and vengeance may have been the motive. In a separate incident, the president of a factory-level union loosely affiliated with the opposition Sam Rainsy Party was gunned down on February 24. FTU President Chea Mony accused a rival union of responsibility, but there is no evidence linking anyone to the crime. Police admit that robbery was not a motive in either case; civil society organizations compared these recent attacks to previous unsolved killings of female entertainers and union activists, noting that in all instances the government security services failed to identify those responsible. End Summary.

Famous Singer Shot by Unidentified Gunman

12. (U) At roughly 0630 on Friday, February 23, an unidentified gunman shot popular singer and television personality Pov Panhapich as she left her parked car and walked to a local school. The gunman, who was riding a motorcycle, shot the singer two times at close range, and then fled on the motorcycle. Witnesses claimed that another motorcycle with two men appeared to have accompanied the gunman, and left the scene at the same time. Initially taken to a local hospital, the singer was transferred to Vietnam for medical treatment. She is reported to be in stable condition, but there are concerns regarding her long-term prognosis, according to press reports.

13. (SBU) Unidentified relatives of the injured singer told the press that Pov Panhapich received telephone threats prior to the shooting. Rumors suggest that the entertainer was romantically linked to a high-level government official, and National Police Commissioner Hok Lundy has been named as a possible love interest. Police have ruled out robbery as a motive, given that nothing was stolen from the young singer when the gunman fled the scene.

14. (SBU) Cambodia's entertainment sector has been plagued with other attacks on female singers. One of Cambodia's most popular actresses and classical dancers, Piseth Pilika, died in 1999 after being shot and killed. Rumored at the time to be PM Hun Sen's mistress, many observers speculated that Hun Sen's wife was behind the actress's death. Touch Srey Nich, a female singer, was shot and paralyzed from the neck down in

2003; her mother died in the same attack. Another young singer, Tat Marina, suffered an acid attack in 2000; the wife of a high-ranking government official and her two bodyguards were implicated in the affair. In all these cases, no one has ever been charged with the crime. The two latter victims relocated to the United States.

Union Leader Shot and Killed

15. (U) At approximately 0515 on February 24, two unidentified men on a motorcycle shot Free Trade Union (FTU) factory-level union leader Hy Vuthy, age 36, three times before escaping. Vuthy was about one mile from the factory on his way home after working the nightshift. Police have not made any arrests but have ruled out robbery as a motive because Vuthy's motorcycle was not stolen. On February 20, Vuthy had written to factory management asking for an additional day off in celebration of Khmer New Year in April. The FTU reported that two Cambodian Union Federation leaders had angrily approached Vuthy the next day and rebuked him for sending the letter.

16. (SBU) On Sunday, FTU national president Chea Mony called a meeting of all factory-level union leaders to discuss the killing. Mony exhorted the government to investigate the case. Noting that three other FTU leaders have been killed since 2003, he called on the government to stop the killings of union leaders, threatening to lead a general strike or public protest if another union leader is killed. (Comment: Mony told us privately that he has no plans to take any action until after local elections are held on April 1. End Comment.) Mony also reminded union leaders of their need to behave honestly and to serve the workers, noting that

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corruption fueled many labor problems.

17. (SBU) Bright Sky and Suntex, two factories sharing an owner and a compound, have been the site of Cambodia's worst labor violence in the past year. Together, the two factories lost more than 30,000 working days due to seven separate strikes in 2006, accounting for nearly 10% of all working days lost in the entire garment industry. In October 2006, a dispute turned violent when anti-riot police shot into the air to disperse illegal strikers; a bullet reportedly struck a garment worker from a neighboring factory. Scores of other workers reported that they had been beaten by police, some with electric batons. In response, Bright Sky permanently closed its night shift in November, saying privately that nightshift workers were responsible for a disproportionate share of labor unrest. The Suntex nightshift remained open.

Comment

18. (SBU) This past weekend's shootings were a chilling reminder of past violent crimes that remain unsolved to this day. The Pov Panhapich case may indeed involve a ranking RGC official; an advisor in the PM's cabinet told us Friday morning about the shooting, noting that he had been directly called upon (nfi) to facilitate the medical evacuation of the injured entertainer to Vietnam. The slain union leader's death, while unrelated to the attack on the female singer, follows the familiar pattern of gunmen on the backs of motorcycles shooting their victims with little fear of capture. While there were two arrests in the case of slain union leader Chea Vichea, those convicted are not believed by the murdered leaders' family members nor human rights community leaders to be the real killers. The other cases remain open case files in the Ministry of Interior, and a silent reminder of Cambodia's continuing culture of impunity.

End Comment.
MUSSOMELI